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ALIEN

By Brett Weiss

"In space no one can hear you scream."

So goes the tagline for *Alien*, one of the greatest (not to mention scariest) science fiction movies ever made. Released in 1979 by 20th Century Fox, *Alien* was directed by the great auteur Ridley Scott (from a screenplay by Dan O'Bannon), who would achieve further fame in the ensuing years with such fantastic films as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Thelma & Louise* (1991), and *Gladiator* (2000). While certain science fiction purists of the day belittled *Alien* for its many monster movie moments, the film did earn its fair share of praise, including: an Oscar for Best Visual Effects; a Hugo for Best Dramatic Presentation; and Saturn Awards for Best Director, Best Science Fiction Film, and Best Supporting Actress (Veronica Cartwright).

The story, which was influenced in part by the sci-fi B-movie classics *It! The Terror from Beyond Space* (1958) and *Planet of the Vampires* (1965), centers around the space freighter Nostromo that, reacting to an apparent distress signal, lands on a dark, dreary, windswept planet, and the resulting chaos that ensues. Said chaos comes in the form of horrifying, acid-dripping, H.R. Geiger-designed monsters that go through several stages of increasingly scary metamorphoses, including an incubation period inside the human body. Needless to say, things don't turn out too well for most of the Nostromo crew members--the chest-bursting business is particularly gruesome.

Thanks to its shockeroo thrills, gothic imagery, and iconic monsters (despite the singular title, there're numerous aliens in the film), *Alien* is as much a horror picture as it is a sci-fi feature. The film oozes with creepy atmospherics from the beginning—the awakening of the Nostromo crew—until the end: Ripley returning to sleep after her nightmarish, but all-to-real alien encounter. Watching *Alien* today, the viewer realizes that it hasn't dated a minute, from the dark, greasy, industrial design of the ship to the gorgeous visual effects to the quality acting of the ensemble cast, which includes Sigourney Weaver (Ripley), Tom Skerritt (Dallas), Veronica Cartwright (Lambert), Harry Dean Stanton (Brett), John Hurt (Kane), Ian Holm (Ash), and Yaphet Kotto (Parker).

Now, the Atari 2600 version of *Alien* is another matter entirely. The game reduces the unqualified brilliance of the film to a simple maze game, one that shares much in common with *Pac-Man* (with some *Freeway* thrown in for good measure). With that bitter pill swallowed (so to speak), the discerning gamer is faced with two points of consideration: Is *Alien* a good *Pac-Man* clone, and is it worth playing? The answer, I'm glad to say, is a resounding "yes" on both fronts.

The protagonist players control in *Alien* is a humanoid that is never referred to by any name other than "you" or "human." Players must guide the stick figure-like being as he scurries around a top-down maze (though the player and the enemies look as though they are turned on their side), avoiding a trio of Aliens and gobbling dots (ahem, crushing Alien eggs) lining the pathways. The maze, which contains a pair of *Pac-Man*-esque side exits called hyperwarp passages, is supposed to represent the hallways in the hull of the Nostromo, but it is utilitarian in nature and largely unadorned.

The Aliens roam around the maze in similar fashion to the ghosts in *Pac-Man*, but they enter from the bottom of the screen instead of the middle. To turn the tables on the Aliens, players can capture one of three pulsars (which parallel the power pellets in *Pac-Man*), temporarily turning the Aliens blue and making them vulnerable to attack. Players are also equipped with a weak, largely ineffectual flame thrower, which can be sprayed on an Alien to make it turn away or become immobilized for a short period of time. The coolest thing about the flame thrower is that spraying it as you run over a pulsar leaves that pulsar in place for later usage.

In addition to eggs, Aliens, and pulsars, each maze contains a pair of prizes that grant extra points. After clearing a maze of Alien eggs, the player enters a brief, but oftentimes difficult bonus round, in which the human runs straight up the screen (to a prize at the top), trying to avoid getting run over by six "traffic lanes" of Aliens moving horizontally. This section obviously mimics Activision's *Freeway*, but is less versatile and, like the main game itself, lacks two-player action.

Alien is a fast, fun, and challenging game with tight four-way control and solid, serviceable graphics. In terms of audio, *Alien*'s "siren song" sound effects mimic *Pac-Man* pretty well. True, the Aliens look silly (certain reviewers have mockingly called them "chattering teeth"), but as movie games and *Pac-Man* clones for the Atari 2600 go, you could certainly do a whole lot worse than *Alien*. Fans of such maze classics as *Jr. Pac-Man*, *Ms. Pac-Man*, *Jawbreaker*, and *Mouse Trap* should at least give it a try.

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with my assessment of the game. Keita Iida of Atari Gaming Headquarters (www.atarihq.com), unable to overlook the game's lack of originality, gives *Alien* a lowly 50% rating (five out of 10, to be more precise). Tom Zjaba of Tomorrow's Heroes (www.tomheroes.com) grades the game a C+, calling the Aliens stupid and easy to fool. This tells me that Mr. Zjaba should have played the decidedly difficult—no matter your prowess—game option three.

Even the game's programmer, Doug "Star Raiders" Neubauer, who designed Alien under the pseudonym of Dallas North, appears to have little to no appreciation for his creation. In an interview published on the Halcyon Days website (accessible via www.dadgum.com), Neubauer, had this to say about his time with Fox Video Games: "I did three games for them under a pen name. One was *M*A*S*H*, and I forget the name of the other two. Fox was more interested in quantity rather than quality, so they wanted their games cranked out in a hurry. The games weren't all that good as I remember."

Prior to playing *Alien*, you should know your options. There are four difficulty levels, selectable by pulling the Game Select lever on the 2600 console:
Level 1: Player begins game with three lives; Aliens move at normal speed.
Level 2: Player begins with two lives; Aliens move fairly fast.
Level 3: Player begins with three lives; Aliens move very fast.
Level 4: Player begins with six lives; Aliens move slowly.

Difficulty switches on the console affect gameplay as well:
Left Difficulty Switch A: Aliens move randomly around the maze pathways.
Left Difficulty Switch B: Aliens move in fixed patterns around the maze pathways.
Right Difficulty Switch A: Capturing a pulsar has no effect on the Aliens.
Right Difficulty Switch B: Capturing a pulsar lets players turn the tables on the Aliens.

Fox Video Games, a division of 20th Century Fox, released *Alien* to little acclaim in 1982. The game was advertised in the company's 1983 catalogue, altering the film's famous tagline to: "In your living room, everyone can hear you scream." In addition, the game was listed under "Coming Attractions" in the 1982 catalogue. (Interestingly, the list also included five games that were never produced: *9 to 5*, *Six Pack*, *Entity*, *Tough Enough*, and, most intriguingly, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*).

Recently (relatively speaking), *Alien* has been the subject of a pair of homebrew hacks. Accessible via AtariAge (www.atariage.com), these include: *Attack of the Mutant Space Urchins* (2002) and *Loco-Robo* (2003), latter of which changes the Alien sprites to robots.

In the years since its release, *Alien* for the Atari 2600, unlike the film on which it is very loosely based, has been largely vilified by purveyors of popular culture. It is almost always written off as a mediocre (or worse) *Pac-Man* clone, but, at least in my opinion, it deserves a spot in any maze fan's library of classic home video games.

In fact, if the disastrous, industry-crushing, needlessly convoluted *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial* had taken the same simple route (imagine E.T. walking swiftly around a maze, dodging hostiles while giddily gobbling up Reese's Pieces), the infamous Great Video Game Crash of 1983/84 may have been turned out a bit differently. That may be overstating things somewhat, but that's my take on *Alien*, and I'm sticking to it.

Full-time freelancer Brett Weiss is the author of the Classic Home Video Games *book series (McFarland Publishers). To catch up with Brett, check out his blog: http://brettweisswords. blogspot.com/.*

MICHAEL THOMASSON'S JUST 4 QIX

I, ROBOT
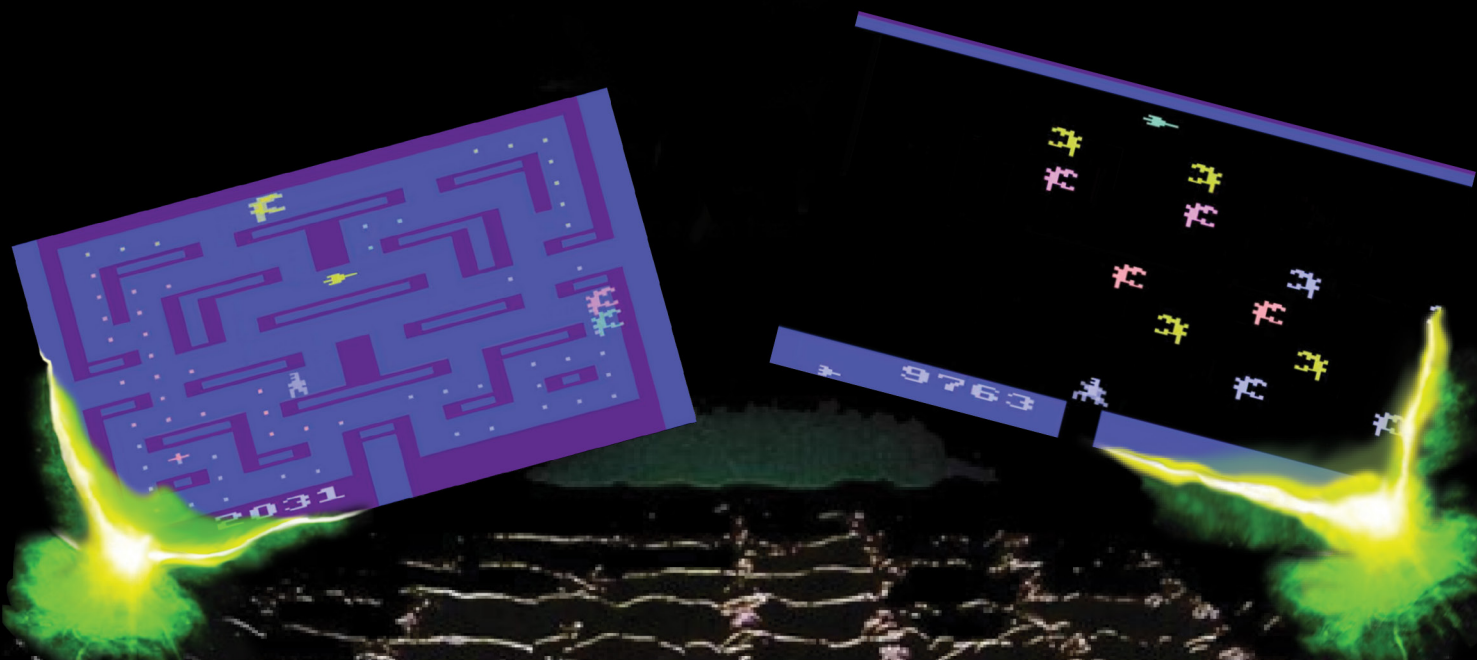
By Michael Thomasson

In the year 1983, the Cold War was still in the minds of American citizens and tensions between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, were elevated. Brewing since 1945, the fear of Communist invasion, espionage and the threat of nuclear Armageddon made for many great stories from Hollywood. Cobbled together with domestic paranoia, *I, Robot* combines both and propels the amalgamation into videogame culture.

In the game, the player controls an unhappy Interface Service Robot, designated as number 1984. It becomes self-aware despite being under complete surveillance and revolts against the propaganda machine of the all-controlling Big Brother and his ever-watchful Evil Eye through 126 levels.

To clear a level, the player must avoid flying objects such as bombs, birds and flying sharks moving from the background to the foreground, and eliminate the shield protecting the Evil Eye with an equipped laser. To do so, the player must bravely enter the "Red Zone," in reference to the Red Army of the Communist Party, and maneuver over the red tiled polygon blocks converting them to blue. To traverse all the surfaces, Interface Robot #1984 must jump across platforms, an action strictly prohibited by Big Brother. If the Evil Eye spies the robot jumping, he is immediately executed so all such action must be enacted while the Evil Eye is closed. Upon completing the task, Interface Robot #1984 destroys the Evil Eye perched upon the pyramid.

During such times of paranoia and conspiracy, one wonders if there were links between the pyramid, the eye in the triangle and the all-seeing Eye of Providence encountered within the game. It is doubtful that the freemasons or any shadow society, including the Illuminati, were involved with the game. I suppose that only the game designer, Dave Theurer, knows for sure… and he is sworn to secrecy and isn't talking! Dave has stated that when he was programming his other nuclear war game, *Missile Command,* he suffered multiple nightmares of six U.S. cities being destroyed by ballistic missiles.

After destroying the Evil Eye, Interface Robot #1984 launches himself into space from the pyramid's peak and hurls through the black of space avoiding or destroying stars and other space debris such as tetras, tankers, meteors, saucers and tetrahedrons.

Every five levels, the space sequence is replaced with an epic battle with a disembodied three-dimensional floating red head. The cranium proceeds to fire cone-shaped missiles at the actual "real world" player and must be destroyed or the projectiles will circle back around and destroy Robot #1984. If you can survive for twenty seconds, then you return to a conventional playfield level.

Occasionally, Interface Robot #1984 enters a pyramid to collect jewels. The player must blast through walls towards the Evil Eye before the encroaching buzz saws chew you up.

Technically, Atari's *I, Robot* was well ahead of its time, being the first commercial video game with filled 3-D polygonal graphics. Prior to *I, Robot* only a handful of 3D games, such as Atari's own *Battlezone* and *Star Wars* titles, had been released and were only presented via wireframe rendering. In fact, another 3D polygon game didn't appear on the scene for another four years, when Namco released *Winning Run*.

Another first was the ability to select camera angles during game play. Pressing either of the "start" buttons would change the viewing angle. Such an action would obstruct the player's view and even allow the player to receive score multipliers rewarding the player for playing a level with limited visibility. During advanced levels, enemy "viewer killers" ignore the Robot #1984 and attacks the actual player, forcing the player to change camera views or perish!

In addition to the multi-directional shooter, the coin-op also included an alternate experience entitled "Doodle City." This mild and non-combative mode allowed individuals that donated a quarter to draw on the screen utilizing the three-dimensional models scaling, rotating and placing in-game 3D models to their heart's fancy for a three-minute period.

If the upright *I, Robot* cabinet looks familiar, then perhaps you've played Atari's *Firefox* which shared the same design. The coin-op also employed a rather unique 'Hall Effect' joystick that worked amazingly off of magnetic fields.

While *I, Robot* was a technical milestone and earned its place in history, the game was a commercial disaster. Initially, it sold only approximately half of the thousand-plus units manufactured. Similar to Atari burying unsold VCS *E.T.* cartridges in the desert, the rumor of dumping five hundred *I, Robot* machines into the Pacific Ocean in transit to Japan still persists. A simplified home version of *I, Robot* was slated for the Atari 2600 but was ultimately cancelled.

Regardless of *I, Robot*'s failures and accomplishments, it has become a curious snapshot of a time when the fear of war, military occupation and Orwellian totalitarianism weighed heavy in the minds of citizens… even those visiting the local arcade!
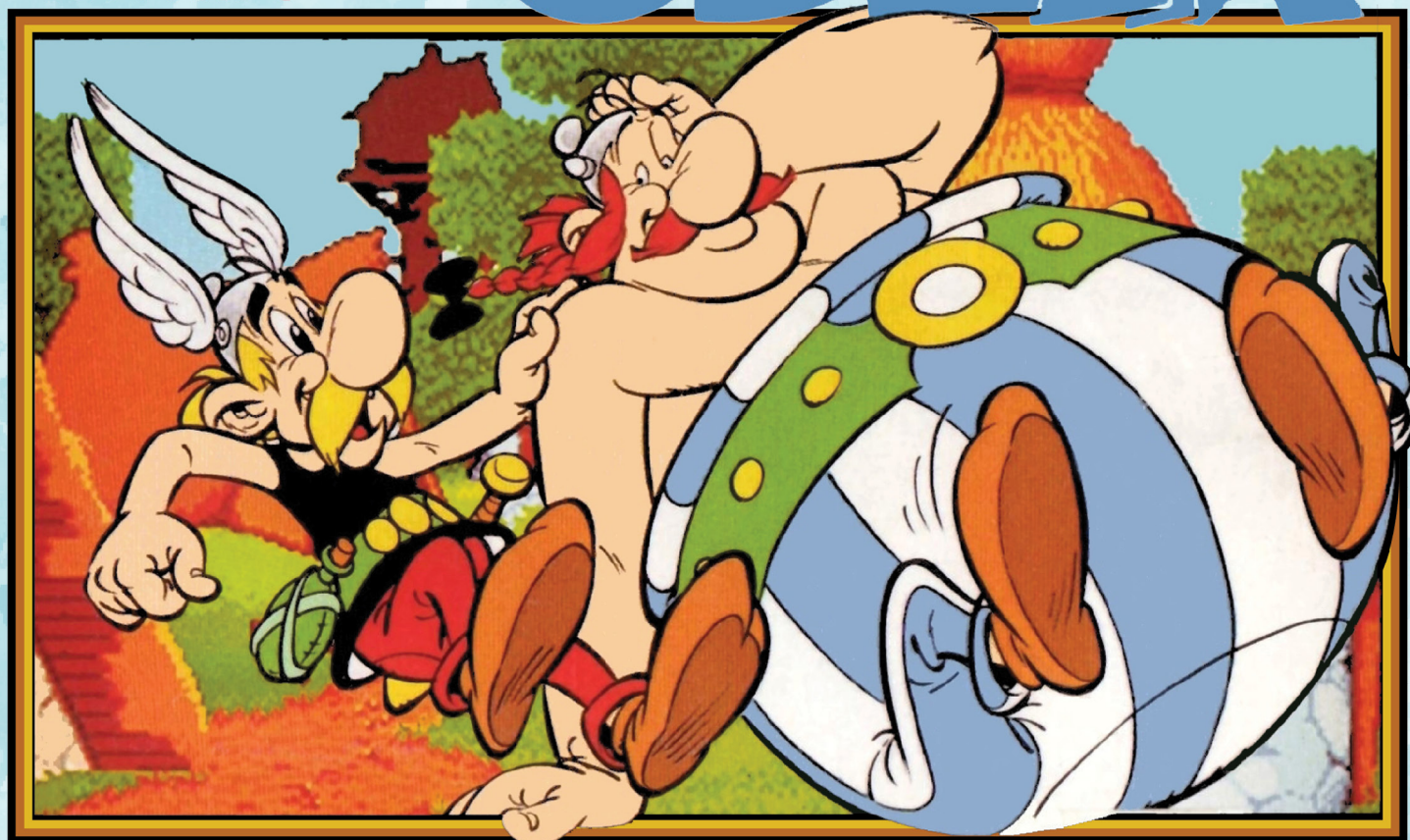
HIDDEN GEMS

BY CAESAR, THESE GAULS ARE UNBEATABLE!

IT'S

Astérix & OBELIX

By Elena García Méndez

Every time I write about a videogame, I see myself as a kid sitting on the floor and playing it with my cousin. With *Asterix & Obelix*, it's the same. I don't actually remember if buying this game was my idea or my dad's, because he has always been fond of the *Asterix and Obelix* comics by René Goscinny, illustrated by Albert Uderzo.

Asterix & Obelix is a side-scrolling, action-adventure platforming game, released in Europe in 1996 for Super Nintendo PAL, PC, Game Boy and later on the Game Boy Color and Game Boy Advance systems. The game offers single and multi-player modes, as well as the choice of Asterix or Obelix as your character.

I recall the many hours my cousin and I played this game. It was never-ending fun. We only had one controller at that time, so we had to take turns playing. As we got better and better, we developed another system: Each of us would play one whole level (or "act", as described in the game).

Sometimes, when the game was very difficult for us, we teamed up! This was often in the Olympics game section. I was in charge of keeping the character moving to the right and making him jump or throw the javelin, while my cousin pressed the green Y button like mad to make Asterix run.

Another memorable scene was the Spanish bullfight! It was always funny to us since that portion of the game was stereotypical of our own country. *Asterix & Obelix* also presents other countries with their own familiar characteristics.

I can't wait to tell you more things about this great game. So let's get going!

INFOGRAMES COMPANY

Infogrames Entertainment SA was a Paris-based international holding company. Infogrames owned both Atari Europe and Atari, Inc in the U.S. Via its subsidiaries; IESA developed and marketed videogames for all the primary consoles and platforms.

The development of *Asterix & Obelix* came about because IESA acquired the rights to several classic Franco-Belgian comics. Besides *Asterix,* these included *Les Tuniques Bleues, Lucky Luke, Spirou,* and the famous *Tintin* and *The Smurfs.*

In 2008, Infogrames bought out Atari, Inc, and in 2009 formerly changed its corporate name to Atari, SA. This move was intended to simplify the company's image and to direct focus onto the famous Atari name.

Screenshot credit: www.hardcoregaming101.net.

BRITANNIA

EGYPTIA

Screenshot credit: www.hardcoregaming101.net.

STORY

Caesar has always been infuriated that a little Gallic village continues to resist him. He decides to put an end to these troubles and orders a palisade be constructed around the village to contain the Gauls. Caesar believes that finally he will have some peace . . . but he has forgotten one tiny detail: These Gauls are totally unbeatable!

To prove that the Gauls can go wherever they wish, Asterix and Obelix decide to travel throughout the world and bring a souvenir to Caesar from each country they visit. I know, what gall!

ASTERIX & OBELIX GO ABROAD

In Britain (based on the book, *Asterix in Britain*): This is where you start your journey. You must rescue the rugby players who are imprisoned in the Tower of London. The doors are really solid but that won't stop Asterix or Obelix. A hard punch will do.

After this, you must make sure your team wins. That's why you have to take part in the rugby match! But the Romans are ahead so far: in the easy mode by four points, in the normal mode by six points, and in the difficult mode by nine points.

You can avoid opponents by jumping and you can pass the ball from Asterix to Obelix or vice versa. Use these tools to your advantage and help the Brits!

In Switzerland (based on the book, *Asterix in Switzerland*): Zurix the banker has disappeared and you must rescue him. But where could he be? He has often talked about how secure his safes are. I'm sure that's a clue! But how are you going to open them? Surely you could use those kegs of gunpowder you see, or perhaps you could simply try your super duper powerful punch. Take your choice and free Zurix.

In Greece (based on the book, *Asterix at the Olympic Games*): The Greek and Roman athletes have already started a seriously intensive training program to win the Olympic games. Will Asterix and Obelix be able to beat them and become first in the running, hurdle and javelin events? You have three attempts at each of them and you must win at least two events to become a champion.

In Egyptia (based on the book, *Asterix and Cleopatra*): Cleopatra has ordered Edifis to build a palace within three months to prove to Caesar that her people aren't decadent. You must assist Edifis by overcoming the Romans who are attempting to destroy the palace using catapults. If you manage to accomplish this, Edifis will give you a golden pyramid as a gift.

In Spain (based on the book, *Asterix in Spain*): Huevos y Bacon, the terrible Spanish chief has been kidnapped and forced to drink poison. You will have to take his place in the arena and take part in the bullfight!

Make Asterix run like mad to avoid the bull. You will be able to jump behind the refuge (barrier) for a few seconds to protect yourself. When the bull crashes into the wall, run in the opposite direction! Soon, the bull will be very confused and tired from all those collisions and you will win! Olé! Thanks, amigo!

(Note: The Game Boy Advance *Asterix & Obelix* uses the book *Asterix and the Black Gold* instead of *Asterix and Cleopatra* as the basis for one of the acts.)

AND THE GRADING IS . . .

Before I tell you my final word on *Asterix & Obelix*, let us consider a few aspects.

First of all let's talk about the characters. You can either play Asterix (small but pretty fast and cunning) or Obelix (slower but super powerful). This is a major improvement over the previous game for Super NES, *Asterix*. I must say that playing with Asterix is by far easier than with Obelix. It can really be difficult to make the hulking Obelix reach platforms or jump across gaps.

Both of these characters are able to punch or super-punch enemies (mostly the Romans, as in the comic books). Whichever method you prefer, it's always funny to see how the Roman flies up in the air and all that's left behind are his sandals. *Paf!* Up you go, Roman!

This leads me to discuss the humor in this game. For example, when Obelix drinks the gourd of magic potion he will become invincible and hit his enemies with his big belly! Another point is in the way the settings of *Asterix & Obelix* are depicted—Britain is foggy and rainy, Spain of course needed a bullfight level, and in Greece you will be able to see statues or little monuments resembling the Classical period.

This game provides a wide variety of settings and each one has its own specific enemy; not only will you encounter Romans but also pirates or Egyptian baddies dressed in the typical costumes. This all adds to the enormous entertainment value the game has.

Furthermore, each country also has its own characteristic music. The developers have really made an effort to achieve this variety. You won't grow bored of listening to the same tune over and over again as in some other games. The soundtrack, composed by Alberto Jose Gonzalez, is really worthwhile.

Regarding the replay value, apart from being able to choose either Asterix or Obelix as your character, you can play in easy, normal, or hard mode. If you are very fond of a certain country, there is a password system, which will enable you to visit it directly, or to skip a country you don't like.

With the amount of acts or levels this game has (20) it is very unlikely you will get bored. Want more? All right, you can try to discover the 16 bonus stages in this game. Collect the 10 stars that are scattered in each level and you will be able to gain access to that level's bonus stage. Good luck!

In conclusion, I would say that *Asterix & Obelix* provides loads of entertainment. The characters, the landscapes, missions and bonus stages will certainly keep you occupied for hours. You won't be disappointed with this game at all, so if you ever have a chance to play it, by all means do so!

I will therefore grade this game with an A.

THE END

Screenshot credit: www.hardcoregaming101.net.

FINAL GRADE: A

A faux interview with the Phantasm Soldier, Yuko Asou.

By Peter G

As I sit in my dressing room, calmly sipping my ginger lemon tea, I glance at the clock on the wall and silently count down from three. There's a knock on my door. Usually, I just expect the knock, but today, I'm looking forward to it. At least, I hope I can look forward to it. You never know when these past acts might cancel at the last minute. Bringing up lost success is never pleasant.

I call out for the knocker to come in. It's the production assistant, headphones around his neck and clipboard in his hand. I can tell from his smile that it's good news. If the guest had cancelled, he would be scowling and getting our backup guest ready for the show. I smiled too. The backup guests were the Dynamite Dux. They were still bitter that Fate prevented them from getting a guest spot on *Captain N -- The Game Master*. I didn't need to sit through that story again.

I was already in my jacket and set to go, just doing a quick tszuj on my tie as I went past the mirror. Down the hall and getting to the sound stage, I see Yuko Asou, sporting a very nice pantsuit ensemble, in a makeup chair with people getting her ready. The years had been kind to her, although there was darkness under her eyes, a sadness, which the crew couldn't cover up. Like all anime creations, she didn't require much to be ready for her close-up. She got out of the chair and as she turned her head to the interview set, she saw me.

I extended a hand to her. "Miss Asou, it is an honor to meet you."

She shook it. Man, that girl had a grip! Then again, wielding a mystical sword kind of gets you ready for that. "Oh, I'll bet you say that to all the D-listers."

"Not at all," I said. "*Valis III* was a real turning point in my video game experiences."

It was. I was the happy owner of a Sega Genesis and looking for new games to play. I was finally starting to notice design teams and such, and starting to associate them with what kind of potential bang for the buck they would provide (I learned early on to approach Sage's Creation and Technosoft with a lot of caution). Renovation was known to me as a company that did solid work and great music in their games. I knew there was a game series called *Valis* and chapters *II* and *III* were on the Turbo Grafx 16's CD peripheral. *III* was out on the Genesis. I decided to take a chance that I would be able to follow the story, assuming it was necessary. After all, you go from left to right, and if it moves, kill it. Don't need a lot of story for that.

But somehow, *Valis III* changed my expectations. It was the first game I could think of where I was more interested in the story and what would happen to the characters next. Getting to the next level wasn't to see what new challenges awaited, but to learn the fates of these characters. Of course, picking up at the end of their saga didn't reassure me that they'd all survive. It was enough that I could overlook the occasional Engrish dialog and the sometimes-sloppy controls (not to mention the insane level ending boss battles that could be downright chaotic). Video games had become a storytelling medium for me, and this was the game that showed me it could be done.

We take our places on the set, each in a low backed comfy chair with a coffee table between us. I lay out my index cards in front of me on the table, but I know I won't have to look at them. I already know all the questions I want to ask.

The director points to us, and we're on. We look at the camera and give our best smiles to the viewers. "Welcome back, and today, I have the privilege of interviewing Yuko Asou, the heroine from the Telenet's classic video game series, Valis. Miss Asou, it is great to have you here."

"Please, call me Yuko. And I don't know if I would call it classic."

I could feel some of the production crew arching their eyebrows at this statement. Most people don't want to seem ungrateful to their employers, especially the ones who gave them their big break. But Telenet was history, destroyed by diminishing returns and a weakening design staff. Yuko hadn't worked in decades, and when Telenet got her a gig, it was one she wouldn't have done if it weren't for the contractual obligation. If saying these things got her blackballed from the field, she was perfectly fine with that.

I realize I'm walking a tightrope, which the wrong line of questioning or the wrong phrasing could send her stalking off the set and me doing bad standup and juggling oranges until a commercial break comes on. I start with a softball, slow and over the plate. "So, your series went from being on the MSX in 1986 to making some sort of appearance on all the major consoles of the time. Were you surprised by the success?"

She tilts her head to the side and closes her eyes. It's a genuine smile, the first I've seen on her face. "Well, sort of. I mean, when Osamu Nabeshima was coming up with me, I was hoping for bigger things to happen." There's a little waver in her smile at this point, the sadness creeping up again. Osamua Nabeshima is a longtime anime guy, who has been involved in numerous hits, including Mysterious Thief Saint Tail and Hamtaro. There was also an assist from Tomokazu Tokoro, who has worked on not so family friendly stuff like Hellsing and Serial Experiments Lain. Clearly, she would have loved her career to continue like theirs did. I mean, who wouldn't?

I move on quickly. "What was it like when production started?"

"Well, it was a little embarrassing," she says with a blush. "I mean, the idea was to combine anime sensibilities with gameplay. So, I'm a schoolgirl on a hack and slash adventure. 'Congratulations, you're the Chosen One. Here's a magic sword. Go get 'em, sport!' And they made me show my panties! When I jumped, I was just hoping that no one would really notice."

I somehow keep my face straight. Anyone who thinks gamers didn't notice doesn't know gamers very well. I wondered briefly if that was why she was wearing the pantsuit instead of a skirt.

"I kind of forgot about that after a while," she continued. "I mean, the story was kind of strange. My friend is kidnapped by King Rogles' demons, I'm the savior of the realms, I meet my real mother...it was a little difficult to follow. I thought for sure that *The Fantasm Soldier* would be the only game. But I guess it did enough right. Fans enjoyed it. They wanted more."

"It's strange, given the heavy anime influence and vibe, that there was never a Valis anime series."

"Yeah, that was one of the things I was hoping for. I mean, when I saw the commercial, I was so excited. But it just never went any further. At least Arle Nadja got some bits, not just a commercial for *Puyo Pop*. Oh, why didn't I fall in with Compile?!?"

The little red choo choo is ready to jump the tracks. I try to bring her back. "Well, you have to admit, the themes such as the death of your friend, Reiko, were uncommon in those days."

"For video games, yes. The technology was finally catching up to the ambitions of the creators. They wanted better visuals, better sounds, better music, and to be able to tell stories. Look at *Metal Gear Solid*. Not much to the original, then the remake on the PlayStation sets the bar."

"Things seemed to be moving in that direction with *Valis II*."

She smiles again. "Yeah, it was like they'd learned from what they did with the first game. Megas takes over and realizes I have the power to destroy him, so he tries to get me first. So I have to fight off Rogles' supporters and Magus' armies. I felt for Magus. He was kicked out just because he could have been a rightful ruler ahead of his younger brother, Rogles. I also lost my real mother, but on the bright side, I found out I had a sister."

"I'll bet THAT was a fun Thanksgiving."

Another genuine smile, although the laugh seemed more for show. "That was where my hopes for an anime really went into high gear. I mean, when the game went to the CD-ROM for the PC Engine and Turbo Grafx 16, it was like, 'Wow! It's going to be just like this! Big story, dynamic visuals, a real musical score....'"

"Bad voice acting in the American translation...."

Another laugh, a good one this time. "Yeah. And people wonder why no one was taking games seriously as a storytelling medium. You know, a little talent goes a long way."

"Still, that and *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* really showed the technology was moving in an exciting new direction. The possibilities were endless!"

"Not really. Most of the games were *Dragon's Lair* clones or just limited interaction, using the visuals to get players excited. I mean, oversimplified gameplay combined with bad set-ups. The novelty of seeing people instead of sprites also meant that you couldn't really control things, so you were basically watching a B movie while memorizing how to see the best ending instead of actually playing something."

"Hey! I liked *Night Trap*!"

"Anyway," she says with a roll of her eyes, "it was better to stick with cinemas and keep the gameplay separate and enjoyable. And it was working, too. *Valis II* did well enough and the fan following grew enough to get III into production."

"Ah, yes," I smile. III is truly my home turf. "An invasion by forces whose own home dimension is about to vanish into oblivion."

"It really made the story interesting. Glames has Leethus, sort of his own version of the Valis sword, and is preparing to lead his forces to seize a new home that won't be destroyed. Glames may have been bloodthirsty, but his actions were actually understandable. He wasn't just some mustache-twirling baddie. There's also that I didn't necessarily have to be involved. I hadn't done anything with the Valis sword in ages when Cham showed up to steal it. She wanted it to avenge her father's death, and the Valis sword was the only thing strong enough to do it. It unfolded well with it being revealed that the Valis sword had more power than had been seen so far."

I blush a little.

"I see you remember the new outfit," she smiles.

"Well, they did make sure we got a good look at the whole thing...."

She laughs again. "I think the three characters also added from a gameplay standpoint. If you preferred distance attacks, close quarters combat, or a happy medium, you could pick the appropriate character relatively early in the game. You had the option to play to your strengths at any time, since you could switch on the fly."

"And that was that for you."

"Pretty much. I was elevated from a guardian to a goddess. I appeared in *Valis IV* to give the Valis sword to Lena, but it was her

quest. Pretty easy gig, that game. I mean, not that much different as a *Valis* game, still a hot schoolgirl with a magic sword fighting all those enemies. Although, I prefer the Japanese version. The American version was pretty heavily edited. Three playable characters down to one, and lots of animated sequences removed. The new level didn't make up for all that."

I blink and clear my throat. There's one more part of her history to cover - recent history. She's been such a sport; I hate to bring it up.

I look at her. She's looking right at me, straight into my eyes. She's radiating calm, she's comfortable around me. She quietly mouths, "Go ahead. Ask."

With a cough, I say, "So...that brings us to the current games, *Valis X*, sometimes called *Valis Cross*. I don't want to say, 'in the series,' because I don't think they are part of the series."

She nods her head and looks at her hands, folded in her lap. "Yeah, lots of fans have that opinion. It started running about the time of the series' twenty-year anniversary. Many happy returns."

"So, what exactly was Telenet thinking when they sold the rights to the *Valis* series to Eants? I mean, they had to know they were going to make hentai games with the property."

"Well, they did publish the Eants-developed titles themselves, so I don't think they had a problem with it, unfortunately. Retelling the four *Valis* games, but with me and the other girls in all kinds of sexual situations. And the tentacles, what is it with tentacles?"

> " The American version (*Valis IV*) was pretty heavily edited. Three playable characters down to one, and lots of animated sequences removed. The new level didn't make up for all that. "
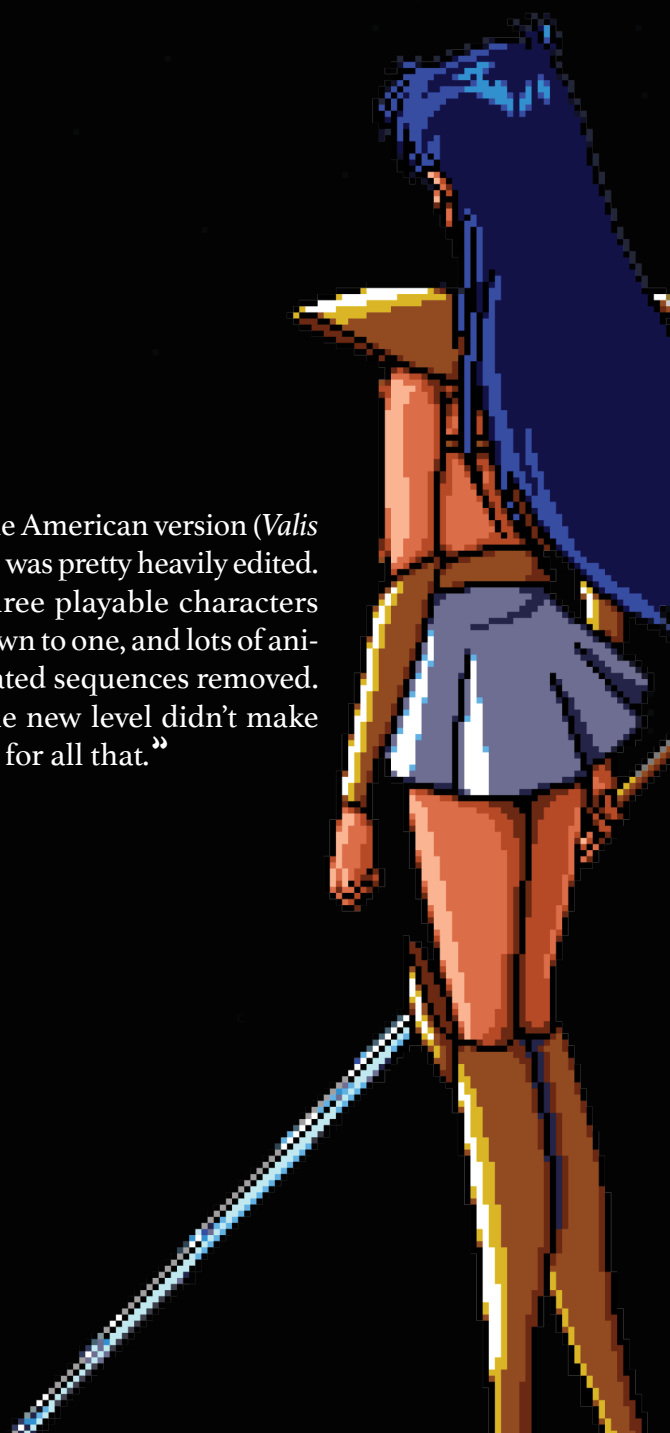
"I don't know. I think what surprised me most is that it was an official release by the company that made it. I mean, people make flash games like this all the time, but that's just some guy doing it to do it. This was the actual company that created you."

"Oh, yeah. Telenet had been having problems for a long time. I mean, they could do good games when they set their minds to it. *El Viento* is a good example, and Wolfteam was doing good stuff. But they also had some bad misfires. *Earnest Evans*, for example. And then there was Sol-Deace...."

"*Sol-Feace*."

"Whatever. But with the *Tales* series being handled by Namco, Telenet fell back on just doing simple puzzlers and mahjong games. That usually means a game company is circling the drain. *Valis X* was sort of a last ditch effort. There was name recognition, and let's face it -- the girls and I are sexy."

"You must like it that the games were critical and fan failures."

"There has been a small but vocal interest in a new *Valis* game. There are people like you, " and here she looked at me sympathetically from under her eyebrows, "that would love to see an update or new installment. The technology is there to make a game that could truly live up to the potential of *Valis*. And what do they make?"

"*'Yuko Does Dallas.'*"

"Yeah. It's available for cell phones and Windows PC's in Japan, and there's no way it's coming out in America. So there's at least one part of the world where I'm still a heroine, even a minor one, instead of...that."

From there, the interview was some general chitchat. Yuko is doing okay, despite a manga series that started in 2008 which, thanks to nudity, is considered ecchi. One of the perks of being a goddess is you don't have to worry about everyday expenses such as food and utilities. In many ways, the Valis series could have been truly great, especially given the success of series like *Xena -- Warrior Princess*. Alas, aside from some desperate flailing, the series, like its company, is over.

The camera goes off. The interview is finished. We stand up and shake hands again. Without an audience to play to, that sad smile is permanently in place. She says it was nice to be interviewed by me, and she heads for the exit, not even bothering to stop and get the stage makeup removed. Her tired pace takes her longer than anyone I've seen.

I remember the opening cinemas from *Valis III*. There's one while setting up the story that says, "Poor Yuko!"

No kidding!

はじめの一歩 THE FIGHTING!

Hajime No Ippo: THE FIGHTING!

By Gerard Buchko

Game developer Treasure has had a great presence on Nintendo's Game Boy Advance. With some instant classics like *Astro Boy: Omega Factor* and *Advance Guardian Heroes*, Treasure has shown that it can deliver its signature gameplay on a portable gaming system.

Heck, Treasure even took a somewhat dead franchise like *Tiny Toon Adventures* and managed to create a unique beat 'em up, *Buster's Scary Dream*. Now, Treasure developing superb beat 'em ups is nothing new. Each of the three above games falls in the beloved beat 'em up genre that Treasure has visited time and time again. Fortunately, Treasure did venture out of the comfort zone of the beat 'em up genre to develop a unique entry in the fighting genre for the Game Boy Advance. Unfortunately, this game never made it over seas so it is little known in the classic gaming scene. So grab some CalorieMate as we take a no holds barred look at *Hajime No Ippo: The Fighting*!

Hajime No Ippo: The Fighting was originally released in Japan on December 12, 2002. Pre dating Treasure's reign of beat 'em ups on the Game Boy Advance, *Hajime No Ippo: The Fighting* is based on the popular Japanese manga/anime *Hajime No Ippo*. It tells the story of a high school student named Makunouchi Ippo who has just begun career in boxing. Throughout the series Ippo meets various contenders as he fights his way earning titles and beating opponents. The Game Boy Advance game delivers a similar story and includes various characters from the anime series. This works as a nice and simple background for a fighting...er, boxing game.

Genre wise, it is hard to peg the game *Hajime No Ippo*. While yes, it is a game about boxing, and yes it is set up in a first person view like other boxing games, dig down and you will find some of the intricate little details that make up some of our most loved fighting games. Extensive move lists, combos, super moves, and special meters - this game has it all. Treasure has managed to merge a genre boxing game with some of the more involved gaming mechanics of a fighting game to deliver a nice, unique blend of the two.

Lets look at the basic menu screen. Thankfully some nice people on the Internet have translated the menu screen as well as some of the other Japanese text in the game. The provided game modes include story mode, tournament mode, VS. mode, sparring mode, customize mode, and an options mode. Story mode lets you battle your way to the top against some classic boxers from the manga and anime. Tournament mode is where you will end up spending the bulk of your time. This mode lets you adjust the difficulty level, which opponents you face, where you fight, how long, how many rounds, etc. This is also the mode where you can pick other fighters you have unlocked. You can also choose to play as one of your customized characters that you have leveled up...more in a bit on that one. VS. mode lets you link with another Game Boy Advance and duke it out with your buds. Sparring mode is a practice mode that lets you hit the gym and practice your moves. Much like other fighting games, you can set up a character and specify if they stand still, move, etc. This gives you the best opportunity to practice specific moves.

Customize mode is another mode that helps up the replay value of *Hajime No Ippo*. Here you can pick one of the unlocked characters and start off at level 1. Your character will be weak and without any special moves. Through playing both story mode and the tournament mode you can earn points which can be spent to level up either your attack, defense, guard, or add some special moves. This combined with the tournament mode and VS. mode (if you know someone with another copy, more on that in a bit) will be where you eventually spend most of your time. Leveling up a character in customize mode is fun. Even more fun is taking your character and trying to beat some of the characters in tournament mode on the hard setting. The option mode lets you remap the buttons, play around with the
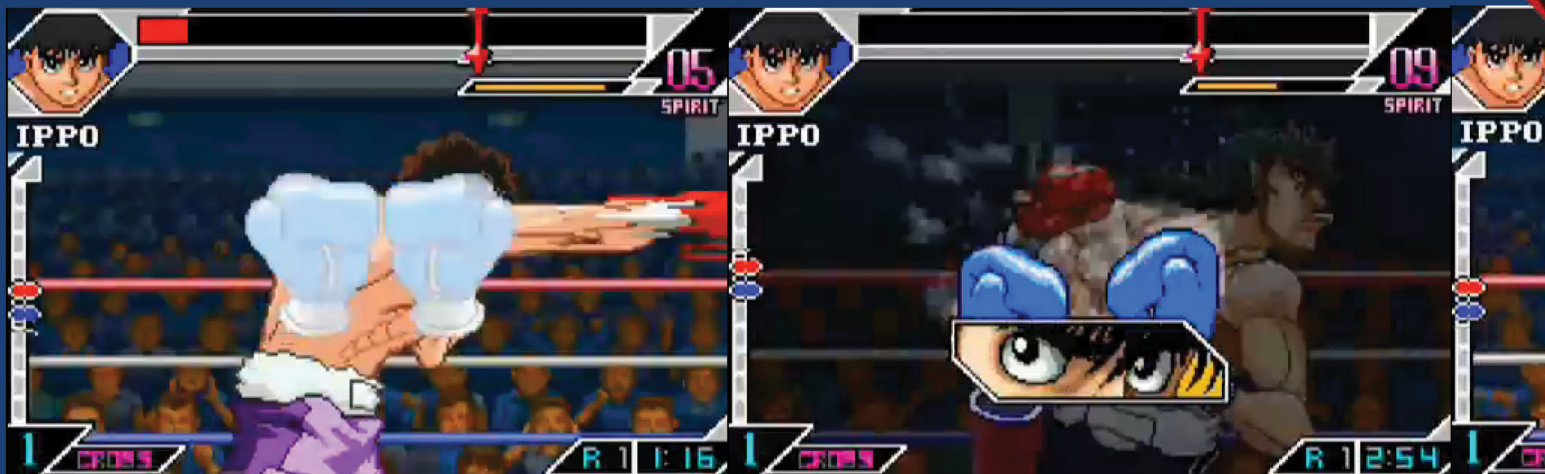
sound test, take a look at your best records, and delete all of your saves. Again, the fighting game vibe begins to really show while going through the menu screen.

What really makes this game shine and stand out is the gameplay. *Hajime No Ippo* throws you in a first person view with a stationary camera where you see your gloves in front of you. This with the stationary camera allows you to see your opponent without any obstructed view. When you bob and weave you will see your gloves move around while the focus remains on your opponent. The up and down buttons on the D-pad move your character forward and back. Next you have four punches you can throw by holding one of the directional buttons on the D-pad and pressing the B button. This allows you to cycle through some jabs, hooks, upper cuts, and some nice kidney punches. Using the D-pad and the A button will have you dodge in the respected direction. Blocking is done automatically.

The game screen also has some bars. The bar on the left shows the distance between you, your opponent, and the ropes while the top bar shows how much damage you have taken, and how much more you have until you get knocked down. Right under this bar is your spirit gauge which functions much like a super bar in a fighting game. This gauge builds up throughout your match as you land blows. A number increases above it which lets you know how many full bars you have for using your super moves. Super moves come in two flavors: offensive spirit which are powerful attacks and defense spirit which can include restoring your guard, dodging incoming blows, etc. The bottom right of the screen shows what round you are in and how much time you have left.

The gameplay is fast and refined in *Hajime No Ippo*. Timing becomes key. You need to keep an eye on your opponent to time dodges and to find openings to throw some punches. Unlike other boxing games and more like fighting games, your combos are not solely based on stunning your opponent and unloading on them. Instead, pulling off an effective combo requires learning the specific types of punches to throw when your opponent lets his guard down. You may be able to throw two jabs, but your combo may be 4 hooks and a special, or two hooks, an upper cut, and a kidney shot. Having a combo system very similar to a fighting game helps keep the gameplay fast. Add that each character has a unique set of combos and you have a decent sized roster at your disposal. Some characters even have counter attacks, increasing the amount of action going on. While blocking is automatic, you can only take so many punches while blocking before your guard breaks. Once your guard breaks you are left open until you can bob and weave your guard back. All of these elements help to create a fun, fast paced fighting game.

Overall, *Hajime No Ippo* is a unique and fun fighting game that delivers a fast paced, smooth flowing gaming experience that should not be missed. It has a nice arcade flavor to it with some added leveling and move customization that will keep you occupied for quite awhile. Unfortunately, due to this game being a Japan only release on the Game Boy Advance, VS. mode becomes almost obsolete. You need two copies of the game to partake in VS. mode which is a real shame. The customization and overall fighting genre just begs to be played against human opponents. The game is somewhat hard to come by, but thankfully does not demand a large amount of money. Copies have been known to go for between $30 and $40. If you're looking for a unique fighting game experience, or you simply want a great non-beat 'em up Treasure game for the Game Boy Advance, then go search out a copy of *Hajime No Ippo: The Fighting*!

THE WAY OF THE CHAMPION WALLPAPER BY MONSHINOBI FOR ANIMEPAPER.NET

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By Brett Weiss
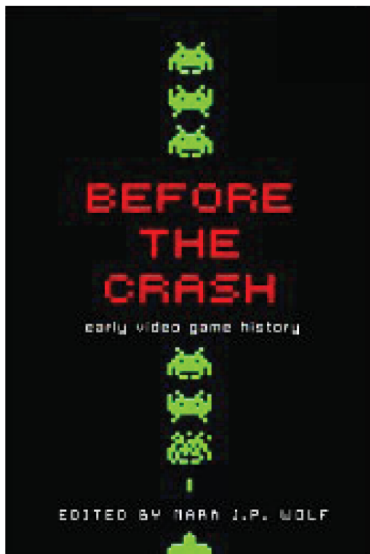
Before the Crash: Early Video Game History
Publisher: Wayne State University Press
Edited by Mark. J. P. Wolf
255 pgs. Suggested retail: $27.95.
Trade Paperback
4 out of 5 stars

By Brett Weiss

*B*efore the Crash is a collection of literary essays covering the exciting world of video games prior to the historically important (at least in terms of business and popular culture) Great Video Game Crash of 1983, which was caused by a number of factors, including the glut of lousy third-party software and the increasing popularity of home computers (such as the Commodore 64).

Nintendo revived (to put it mildly) the all-but-dead North American market for video games with the release of the NES in 1985, but that's a subject for another day. For now, let's focus on a time when the word "Atari" (as opposed to "Nintendo" or "Xbox") was synonymous with video games.

Some argue that there are too many books on classic gaming being published these days, which is a ridiculous assertion. For every book about classic video games, there are thousands covering old movies, music, and television. With its emphasis on under-reported aspects of the industry, *Before the Crash* proves there can never be too much of a good thing, at least when it comes to books about our favorite hobby.

The variety of subject matter in *Before the Crash* is truly impressive, offering deep (relative to the subject matter), insightful commentary on such divergent topics as reading the Atari catalog, early video game audio, "The Rise and Fall of Cinematronics," the Fairchild Channel F system (20 pages on the vilified progenitor of the Atari VCS!), and early online gaming in the form of BBSs and MUDs.

Mark. J. P. Wolf, who compiled this collection of essays, writes about The Video Game Industry Crash of 1977 while *Phoenix: The Fall & Rise of Videogames* author Leonard Herman contributes a chapter on ball-and-paddle consoles. Both are interesting, largely untapped subjects that most any video game fan with an appreciation for the past will thoroughly enjoy reading about.

One caveat: As mentioned in the first sentence in the first paragraph of this review, *Before the Crash* is a *literary* work, meaning the text can get abstruse at times, at least for the average reader without a PhD in cultural history or critical studies (to name the qualifications of two of the contributors to this book).

For those wanting a scholarly work on the pre-NES era of video games, especially one reporting on esoteric aspects of the industry and intelligently placing said aspects within their context, *Before the Crash: Early Video Game History* is well worth picking up.

~Brett Weiss is the author of the *Classic Home Video Games* book series (McFarland Publishers).

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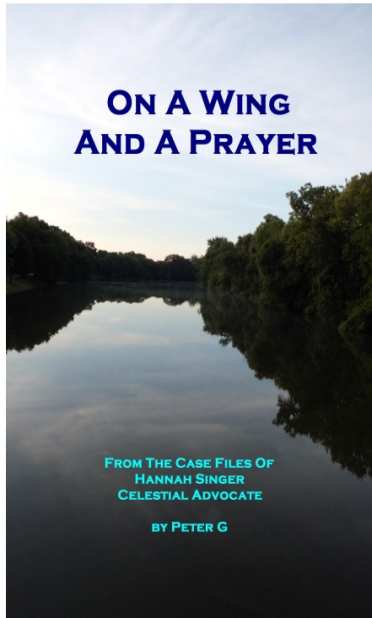
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